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ABSTRACT

Adults many times misunderstand adolescence and the problems from which adolescents suffer. However, there are few quantitative studies that have evaluated the prevalence of "common" teenage problems. To address this lack of hard data concerning perceived high school/adolescent problems, a study was commissioned to determine student-perceived problems in high schools. It was hypothesized that major problems in the high school would be drug abuse, physical abuse, and peer/social problems. To test this hypothesis, 798 students in grades 8-11 responded to a survey. Results indicate that the top five reported problems were achievement, stress, drug use, friends, and family. Physical abuse was not a frequently reported problem. Significant effects for student gender and grade level were associated with the perceived problems of drug use, with drug use being a more common problem among males. More females than males indicated problems with friends and family; the lack of significant main effects for grade level on family and friend problems suggests that these problems stay relatively constant throughout the adolescent years. The lack of sex differences for problems related to achievement and stress may suggest that these problems are general for adolescents. The study survey is appended. (Author/RJM)

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High School Students' Perceptions of Adolescent Problems

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Abstract

Present adult society places an onus on the evils of adolescence and the problems from which they suffer. There is widespread media coverage of such teenage problems as pregnancy, drug use, and rebellion against parents. However, there are few quantitative studies that have evaluated the prevalence of these "common" teenage problems. To address this lack of hard data concerning perceived high school/ adolescent problems, a study was commissioned to determine (quantitatively) student perceived problems in high schools. It was hypothesized that major problems in the high school would be drug abuse, physical abuse, and peer/social problems. To test the hypothesis, a study was designed to evaluate the self-report variables of perceived problems through a school wide questionnaire administration. Results partially supported the hypotheses. The top five reported problems of high school students were achievement, stress, druguse, friends, and family, respectively. Problems of physical abuse were not significantly related to sex and high school class. A significant interaction was found with the perceived problems of druguse (by levels of sex and high school class).

High School Students' Perceptions of Adolescent Problems

To offer a truly effective education, school administrators and faculty must have an understanding of the issues facing adolescents today. To relate genuinely to adolescents, one must realize that their psychosocial identity is in the conflicting stage of identity versus role confusion (Hoffman, 1995). This conflict intensifies the all too familiar problem of negative peer pressure. Peer pressure can lead to other problems such as drug abuse, eating disorders, and sexual promiscuity. On top of these issues, family problems such as divorce can further complicate adolescents' lives.

Wills, McNamara, Vaccaro, and Hirky (1996) surveyed adolescents in seventh, eighth, and ninth grades. Measures of tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana use, and of constructs from three theoretical models of substance use, were obtained at each point. Clustering analysis for substance use data indicated subgroups of nonusers, minimal experimenters, late starters and escalators. The authors found that escalators were experiencing high life stress, parental or peer substance use, low parental support, and had nonadaptive coping skills (Wills et al, 1996).

Tang, Wong, and Schwarzer (1996) offer corroborating results. In their study, drug use frequencies were found to be highly associated with peer drug use, family drug use, susceptibility to peer pressure, and perceived control to gain access to drugs and intention to try other substances. Exclusive use of marijuana was associated with high susceptibility to peer pressure and with perceived control to gain access to drugs (Tang et al, 1996). Segal and Stewart (1996) also cite the failure to develop strong ties to social institutions as another factor influencing teen drug abuse. Hoffman (1995) investigated the relationship between family structure and marijuana use. He found that parental divorce or living with a stepparent decreased family attachment among adolescents. This attenuated family attachment increased the likelihood of associating with drug-using peers, which in turn increased the probability of marijuana abuse.

Eating disorders also haunt many adolescents. Cattarin and Thompson (1994)

recognized the role of peers in the acquisition of anorexia nervosa. An individual's level of obesity predicted teasing, which in turn led to overall appearance dissatisfaction. Body dissatisfaction predicted restrictive eating practices. It is also quite likely that young children become critical of their bodies due to constant media coverage of extremely thin women. Shaw and Waller (1995) reported that the media's impact appeared to be mediated in part by the social comparison process, particularly among adolescents. Steps toward reduction of this process include encouraging adolescent females to question their acceptance of these images.

Adolescents are increasingly affected by their sexual experiences and attitudes. Sixty-percent of doctors report addressing the issues of sexually transmitted diseases, HIV, pregnancy prevention and responsible sexual behavior with their patients. However, less than 50% of doctors address the issue of abstinence with adolescents. For this reason, more pediatricians now perform abstinence counseling to their patients (Patton, Kolasa, West, & Irons, 1995).

The purpose of the present study was to quantify students' perceptions of problems in high schools. It was hypothesized that major problems in the high school would be drug abuse, physical abuse, and peer/social problems. To investigate this hypothesis, a self-report measure was designed to evaluate the frequency and interactions of perceived problems in a suburban high school.

Method

Subjects

Seven hundred and ninety-eight high school students responded to a survey administered in a medium-sized public, suburban high school. Of the respondents, 222 were in eighth-grade, 197 were in ninth-grade, 199 were in tenth-grade, and 180 were in eleventh-grade. Twelfth grade students were not included in the sample. Most subjects could be classified as coming from middle to upper class backgrounds.

Questionnaire

The self-report questionnaire was designed to identify student-perceived problems in the high school. This identification was operationalized by

developing a fourteen item scale of perceived pressures and problems. The questionnaire consisted of two sections: an experimenter-created Perceived Pressure Scale, and a section of demographic questions (Appendix). A separate answer sheet was used for the recording of each subject's responses to the questionnaire.

Procedure

On the basis of piloting, problem items selected for inclusion in the Perceived Pressure Scale were characterized by appropriate face validity regarding commonly considered adolescent concerns. After analysis of the perceived problems battery, a single questionnaire was designed which included the completed Perceived Pressure Scale and a number of demographic questions.

The survey was administered to the student body during the morning homeroom session. Of the possible questionnaire administration periods available throughout the day, this was considered the best because in homeroom students are likely to be alert, attentive, and a "captive audience," entertaining fewer distracting thoughts (as opposed to a questionnaire administration held later in the day).

Since the desire for social acceptance often leads people to respond to personal questions in a way they believe others would approve, the questionnaire was administered anonymously, with individual responses remaining confidential. Although gender can influence the results of a study, the overall sex ratio at the high school was previously determined to be close to a 1:1 ratio, ensuring that an approximately equal number of males and females would be surveyed.

Results

Frequency analyses were performed to identify the rankings of perceived problems in the high school. The top five reported problems cited by the students were achievement, stress, drug use, friends, and family. Table 1, shown below, lists the frequencies and percentage values of reported perceptions of high school problems.

TABLE 1

PERCEIVED PROBLEM	FREQUENCY OF REPORT	PERCENT	PERCEIVED PROBLEM	FREQUENCY OF REPORT	PERCENT
Achievement	432 of 798	54.1	Popularity	192 of 798	24.1
Stress	425 of 798	53.3	Suicide	187 of 798	23.4
Drug Use	415 of 798	52.0	Abuse	180 of 798	22.6
Friends	339 of 798	42.5	Gossip	179 of 798	22.4
Family	283 of 798	35.5	Peer Pressure	171 of 798	21.4
Depression	262 of 798	32.8	Eat Disorder	152 of 798	19.2
Money	240 of 798	30.1	Dropping Out	96 of 798	12.0
Romance	230 of 798	28.8	World Issues	68 of 798	8.1
Sexual Behavior	206 of 798	25.8			

A two by four ANOVA (sex by high school class) were performed on the top five reported items. Significant sex and high school class main effects were found on the majority of items. Females reported greater problems involving friends than did males (females: x=.52, sd=.50, n=409 versus males: x=.33, sd=.47, n= 389; F=2.56, df=3; p=.054). Females also reported greater concern about family issues than did males (females: x=.45, sd=.50, n=409 versus males: x=.26, sd=.44, n=389; F=31.00, df=1; p<.05). There were no effects for high school class on reporting of these two problems.

Respondents from different high school classes reported significantly different perceptions of student problems. Juniors in high school perceived greater problems with achievement than did eighth graders (eleventh graders: x=.64, sd=.48, n=180 versus eighth graders x=.52, sd=.50, n=222; F=3.92, df=3; p<.05). Also, upperclassmen perceived more problems related to stress (F=13.00, df=3; p<.05). There were no significant main effects for the sex of the

respondents in reference to these two problems.

In addition to these significant main effects, a significant two-way interaction was found involving the perceived problem of drug use ($F=2.76$; $df=3$; $p< .05$). A significant interaction effect means that sex and high school class worked together to produce a joint effect different from the main effects they each produced. For example, while ninth and tenth grade females were more likely to report drug use problems than their eighth or eleventh grade counterparts, the opposite was true for males; younger males reported the greatest drug use problems of all groups. Table 2, shown below, reports the cell means of the perceived problem of drug use by levels of sex and high school class; the parentheses indicate the number of students for each cell. If the student perceived the item as a problem, the student would circle the item (this response was coded as a 1). If the student did not perceive the item as a problem, the student would not circle it (this lack of a response was recorded as a 0).

TABLE 2

		GRADE EIGHTH	NINTH	TENTH	ELEVENTH
SEX	FEMALE	.41 (115)	.55 (102)	.52 (93)	.39 (99)
	MALE	.64 (107)	.69 (95)	.48 (106)	.48 (81)

Discussion

It was hypothesized that the major problems in the high school would be drug abuse, physical abuse, and peer/social problems. Results partially supported the hypotheses. The top five reported problems of these high school students were achievement, stress, druguse, friends, and family. Physical abuse was not a frequently reported problem. Significant effects for sex and high school class were found with the perceived problems of drug use. However, problems of physical abuse were not significantly related to either sex or high school class.

The lack of significant main effects for sex as related to the problems of

achievement and stress may be interpreted to suggest that these problems are general for the adolescents, and have an equal prevalence for both sexes. xf the other problems of drug use, friends, and family, significant differences between the sexes were noted. Drug use was reported to be a more common problem by males. Conversely, more females indicated problems with friends and family.

The lack of significant main effects for high school class on problems related to friends and family suggests that these problems stay relatively constant throughout the adolescent years. The family and friendships (and the problems associated with them) often stay relatively static during these times, and the data may reflect this supposition. Conversely, the significant changes over time (as measured by high school class level) for the variables of achievement, stress, and drug use suggests that the last two years of high school are very demanding for adolescents. This may be due to an increased emphasis placed on the impending "real world," including upcoming entrance into college or the workplace.

To provide an environment that is conducive to learning, it is important that members of the high school administration be cognizant of the specific problems faced by their students. With this knowledge, it is possible to design and implement more effective programs to help students cope with their problems.

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Appendix

This survey affects you! Please read it carefully. Results from this survey will be used to select and train individuals within the school to provide help to students who want it. Your response is confidential and anonymous.

Read each question carefully. Write your responses with a #2 pencil, filling in the space on the answer sheet that matches your response.

1. I am:
   A. Female B. Male

2. I am in grade:
   A. 8 B. 9 C. 10 D. 11 E. 12

3. When I have a problem, I usually try to get help from:
   A. a friend
   B. a parent
   C. an adult at school (teacher or counselor)
   D. an adult outside of school (religious advisor, youth worker, neighbor, relative, family friend)

Directions: Read the items numbered #4 to #20 before you respond. For each statement, please circle those items that you view as a problem for yourself or the high school.

4. Abuse (sexual, physical, emotional, or threats of same)
5. Achievement in schools (grades, goals)
6. Depression (loneliness, loss)
7. Dropping out or being suspended/disciplined
8. drug use (marijuana, alcohol, cocaine, nicotine, etc.)
9. Eating disorders (anorexia, bulimia, obesity, weight control, self-image)
10. Family (communication, relationships, conflicts with family members)
11. Friendships (jealousy, communication, support)
12. Money (school expenses, living expenses, getting a job)
13. Popularity (fitting in, belonging)
14. Romantic relationships (girlfriend/boyfriend)
15. Sex-related concerns (sexual/romantic behavior, birth control, sexual identity, pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases)
16. Thoughts of suicide, self-destructive actions, and high-risk behaviors
17. World issues (hunger, war, etc.)
18. Gossip
19. Peer pressure
20. Stress (this is a general category)